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Ontario Literacy Coalition

Submission to
The Honourable Dwight Duncan
Minister of Finance

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The Ontario Literacy Coalition (OLC) is a charitable, non-profit adult literacy organization with close to 300 members from across the province, made up of literacy programs, networks, individuals, and people with literacy challenges.

We work to ensure that people with literacy challenges live full lives at home, at work and in their communities. We envision an Ontario where people with literacy challenges have access to high quality supports and opportunities, where they can find and use the information they need.

Ontario is a province with huge social and cultural advantages. It has enormous economic potential. If Ontario were a hockey player, it would no doubt be a first-round draft pick. But there are policy areas in which we could and must improve. Given our low adult literacy and basic skills rates, our adult literacy policy is clearly one of those.

The Ontario Government displayed invaluable leadership with its 2005 Budget by giving a much-needed boost to post-secondary education. Clearly, college and university students will greatly benefit from that budget. The OLC applauds the government for the most significant injection into Ontario's post-secondary education in 40 years. The government displayed invaluable leadership in the area of post-secondary education with its 2005 Budget. The Province of Ontario needs the government to do the same for adult literacy with its 2006 Budget.

The 2005 International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS) showed that 16.2 per cent of adults in Ontario have serious difficulty with even the most basic written materials. The IALSS survey also found that another 26 per cent of Ontarians had literacy

skills below the minimum level needed to cope with the complex demands of everyday life and work in our global economy.

This situation has persisted over the past decade, and promises only to worsen at the current funding levels. Failure to act today will carry consequences for individual citizens and the economy in Ontario.

While the estimated labour supply at higher education levels seems enough to meet Ontario's future labour market needs, a large percentage of Ontarians do not have the minimum literacy skills required for lifelong success in the labour market. We also appear to have a lower rate of workplace training investment by employers than our neighbours to the south.

Literacy investments are sound. There is growing evidence that adult literacy and basic skills are instrumental to economic growth. Several recent studies have taken on the task of disentangling the impact of adult literacy on economic growth from that of formal education.¹ Using IALS data, these studies concluded that differences in levels of adult literacy skills among OECD countries explained fully 55% of the differences in economic growth over 1960-1994.

This implies that investments in raising adult literacy skills levels can yield large economic returns. Indeed, an OECD study showed that a 1% increase in adult literacy levels generates a 1.5% *permanent* increase in GDP per capita.²

In June 2005, a very strong case for sustained political commitment to adult literacy was made by MPP and Parliamentary Assistant to the Minister of Education, Kathleen Wynne with the report *Ontario Learns: Strengthening Our Adult Education System*.³ Now, Ontarians need this government to make that commitment by coming through with strong funding for adult literacy in the 2006 Budget.

¹ *Education For All Global Monitoring Report - Literacy for Life* UNESCO, 2006.

http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=43009&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

² *Literacy scores, human capital and growth across fourteen OECD countries* (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, Statistics Canada, 2004).

³ Kathleen Wynne, MPP, and Parliamentary Assistant to the Minister of Education: *Ontario Learns: Strengthening Our Adult Education System* 2005.

Ontario's Literacy and Basic Skills and Upgrading Programs

Of the millions of Ontarians with literacy challenges, only 46,500 annually attend intensive, long-term Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) programs and upgrading (OBS - Ontario Basic Skills) programs. The majority of these programs are funded, fully or in part, by the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU). Services are offered by 207 colleges, school boards, and community-based agencies in the Anglophone, Francophone, Native and Deaf streams.⁴

Provincial Budget Priorities and the OLC's Recommendations

Recommendation 1: The OLC calls on the Minister of Finance to provide increased funding to adult literacy programs.

Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU) funds both Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) agencies and college upgrading programs, offering services along a continuum of low level to high level literacy. These programs address the need for foundational skills training, but their capacity is limited. Without additional funding, the programs do not have the ability to maintain, let alone increase, their capacity to serve Ontarians with literacy challenges.

Both literacy and upgrading programs are excellent services with important objectives and committed staff located within the Ministry department and in the delivery agencies. However the programs are in dire need of additional resources.

Despite increasing demands, higher infrastructure costs and expanded provincial accountability obligations, annual literacy funding in Ontario has been flat-lined for many years. While the college upgrading programs have been the fortunate recipients of new funding through the Learning to 18 initiative, this funding have come with new delivery obligations and in no way contribute to the experienced funding short fall.

Simply put, Ontario's literacy system is stretched to the breaking point. By providing additional resources and streamlining accountability measures, the government would help literacy programs return to the business of delivering quality literacy services.

⁴ 2003/04 Annual Report of the Literacy and Basic Skills Program (Toronto: Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, 2004; College Sector Committee for Adult Upgrading, "College Delivery Statistics," College Sector Committee for Adult Upgrading, <http://www.collegeupgradingon.ca/pubres/stats/1.htm> (accessed February 7, 2005).

Adult literacy is a key component of public education and deserves as much attention as its larger cousins, primary and post-secondary education. Literacy and numeracy are the foundations for an adult's future success. Increasing enrolment in colleges and universities is certainly laudable and we invite the government to establish a similar goal for adult literacy and upgrading programs.

The government is “investing in improving our education system from JK to post-secondary.”⁵ The OLC looks to the government to make sure adult literacy is part of this commitment.

Recommendation 2: The Government of Ontario needs to take a broader approach to literacy. While labour market development is important, it should not be the only focus for adult literacy and academic upgrading programs.

A broad vision for literacy is critical, not only to the well-being of individuals, but to the prosperity of all Ontarians. We need a strategic approach to literacy that respects the goals that people with literacy challenges have for work, and also respects their priorities in daily life – pursuing further education and training, helping their children learn, being effective citizens, and participating in their communities.

Employment continues to be this government's major focus for adult literacy programming. With the government's new initiative, *One Stop Training and Employment System*, all agencies with a stake in labour market development, including adult literacy and upgrading programs, are poised to become part of a system that provides seamless access to relevant services and flexible learning pathways. The One Stop system has the potential to better serve these literacy clients who have employment as a goal.

However, we must not lose sight of the other reasons why people seek out literacy and upgrading programs. In addition to further education and training, these reasons are often amassed under the heading "independence". By independence, we mean that learners can take control of their lives and participate in their communities and families and in the education of their children. A commitment to independence as a goal is unique to adult literacy programs within MTCU's overall program portfolio, and as numerous learners and literacy practitioners affirm, it serves a real need.

Adults learn at their own pace and within the context of their lives as adults. They need to be given the time it takes to improve the foundational skills that are going to lead them to other successes as workers, family members, and members of the community.

⁵ *Getting Results for Ontario: Progress Report 2004* (Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario, 2004), 11.

The government must ensure that adequate time and resources are made available to the participants in literacy programs so they have the opportunity to work towards well-paid, quality jobs as well as towards further education, training and independence.

Recommendation 3: As part of a broad approach to literacy, we urge the government to better respond to the diversity of participants in our literacy programs, including youth, newcomers to Canada and people with developmental disabilities.

Youth and Literacy

We congratulate the government on its "Learning to 18" strategy and especially its commitment to providing new academic upgrading and training options each year for young people who have dropped out of high school. New funding of \$2 million in 2004-05, growing to \$15 million in 2007-08, has been allocated.⁶

These strategies should go some way towards meeting the OLC's concerns about the number of youth with literacy challenges who are not earning a high school diploma and consequently are not prepared for the labour market. A significant number of these young people lack basic literacy and numeracy skills, speak English as a second language or have special needs. As a result, these young people will not be successful in accessing and completing further education programs and finding employment.

With the removal of lower age eligibility criteria, literacy agencies are now permitted to serve the needs of the youth who used to be turned away because they did not meet the age criteria. However, as we pointed out earlier, without additional funding, programs will be very hard pressed to increase their capacity to serve young people. Furthermore, youth often require special programming and special classes to properly meet their needs. Youth-appropriate programming is required.

Newcomers to Ontario

Refugees and immigrants need to have access to quality literacy programming. Currently, in Ontario, we are struggling with gaps in literacy service to these groups.

Current programming may not meet the *literacy* needs of these individuals. Funding for "first language" bridging programs for newcomers who have literacy challenges in their first language is needed.

Although refugees and immigrants have been identified as having clear needs for literacy and language upgrading, services to help them are often not available. Literacy and English as a Second Language (ESL) needs are often dealt with quite distinctly because

⁶ Ministry of Finance Press Release, May 18, 2004.

of provincial and federal jurisdictions. Literacy programs may refer newcomers with literacy needs to Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) and ESL classes – and visa versa.

People with Developmental Disabilities

In Ontario, many people with developmental and other kinds of disabilities do not meet eligibility requirements of LBS programs. They may not meet the minimum standard of acceptance or show progress in the way the system requires. A survey done by the OLC within the literacy field found that adults with developmental disabilities are not being served in a coordinated or consistent way across the province. This needs to change.

Recommendation 4: The government needs to take a leadership role in supporting family literacy development, building on the important but insufficiently funded work already undertaken across the province.

Family literacy is about the ways families use literacy and language in their daily lives. It is about how families learn, use literacy to do everyday tasks, help children develop literacy, use literacy to maintain relationships with each other and the community, and interact with organizations and institutions. Investing in family literacy programming is a concrete, proactive and economical way to address the educational and training needs of Ontario's future.

Given the importance and need for family literacy programs, surely Ontario must have a strong system for delivering them. Unfortunately, a recently completed province-wide survey, commissioned by the OLC and Action for Family Literacy Ontario (AFLO), found that family literacy services lack sustainable funding, resulting in short-term planning, vulnerable employment for staff, lack of funds for training and resource development, and a high dependency on volunteer support.

Currently in Ontario, family literacy is part of a fragmented system where different provincial ministries focus on different parts of the family. Ontario needs a centralized, cross-ministerial directorate for family literacy, to integrate and coordinate activities, and to support partnerships.

Family literacy programs require committed core funding to operate effectively and meet the needs of the communities they serve. MTCU should also expand the LBS program funding to include family literacy programming.

Family literacy programming provides double the return on investment because while improving children's social and educational outcomes, they also help adults to improve their literacy skills as well as their skills as parents, workers and community members.

The OLC calls upon the government to support family literacy development to help families to break the intergenerational cycle of low literacy and poverty. The rewards for investing in family literacy are many—the costs of inaction are high.

Recommendation 5: Participation in life-long learning, beyond leaving school age, should be a significant public policy objective for the Government of Ontario.

Today, it is now widely reckoned that, in modern societies, lifelong learning is fundamental to the sustainability of economic, as well as social policies.

From a labour market policy perspective, lifelong learning policies are important to ensure that workers keep pace with evolving skill requirements in their sectors.

The demands of our knowledge-based society are escalating faster than ever before and the minimum level of literacy required to succeed is rising at an equal pace.⁷ This is particularly important when it comes to new and rapidly changing technologies of communication and information. Moreover, literacy skills tend to decrease over time. For lifelong success in the labour market, there is a need for lifelong training.

From a social policy perspective, benefits from lifelong learning are related to factors such as improved self-esteem, empowerment, creativity and critical reflection. These are intrinsically valuable, and may also be instrumental in realizing other social policy objectives such as reducing social exclusion and poverty, and increased political and civic participation.

Lifelong learning can be very effective in helping Ontarians maintain good health, raise healthy children and educate them.

⁷ National Literacy Secretariat Fact Sheet, “Literacy, It’s not what it used to be,” National Literacy Secretariat, [http:// www.nald.ca/NLS/nlsild/fact8.htm](http://www.nald.ca/NLS/nlsild/fact8.htm) (accessed February 7, 2005).

In Closing

While there were encouraging elements in last year's budget, there is still much work to be done in addressing Ontario's long-term social and economic challenges. Adult literacy is a great place to start. We need to increase funding to the field of adult literacy substantially.

The OLC is looking forward to continued opportunities to work with the government on adult literacy initiatives.

Respectfully,

Anette Chawla
Executive Director